

Baseball in the Masculine Age: Sport and Popular Media as a Means of Revolution

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On November 10, 1869, Reverend Dr. William Aikman delivered an address on manliness to the Young Men's Christian Association at the Spring Street Presbyterian Church. In the speech, he delineated the prerequisites for manliness, including a "healthy physique, as not the least important."¹ Reverend Dr. Aikman saw a physically fit body as a component of masculinity, but not as the key aspect. This would soon change; Aikman's speech came on the precipice of a revolution in American masculinity. The rise to prominence of baseball as the national pastime spearheaded this new era. Indeed, earlier that same year, the Cincinnati Red Stockings had become the first entirely professional baseball team. As the notion of American masculinity underwent a revolution following the Civil War, the baseball player became a key exemplar of the new muscular masculinity. Baseball served as a vehicle for the transformation and promulgation of this new conception of American masculinity, particularly through various popular media, such as baseball cards, poetry, and paintings.

By the late 1800s, the classical Victorian masculinity performed by middle-class white Americans was under attack on multiple fronts. Immigrant men entering the political arena contested the traditional power holders' manhood. At the same time, working men began an era of labor unrest during the Gilded Age that threatened the exclusive perch of middle-class men atop the economic hierarchy, and the conception of the "New Woman" violated the gender roles of Victorian homes.² According to historian Gail Bederman, "these challenges from women, workers, and the changing economy not only affected men's sense of identity and authority, they even affected men's view of the male body."³

With the new movement of muscular Christianity gaining steam

¹ "Developing Manliness," *New York Times*, Nov. 10 1869.

² Gail Bederman, "Remaking Manhood through Race and 'Civilization,'" in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13-14.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

beginning in the mid-1800s, middle-class men began to idealize the muscular male body. First espoused by Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1858 in “The Value of Physical Fitness,” muscular Christianity encapsulated the new keys to male identity and masculinity in America: exercise and physical fitness. Higginson happily proclaimed in his essay that finally American “moral conceptions are expanding to take in that ‘athletic virtue’ of the Greeks.” To Higginson, “physical health is a necessary condition of all permanent success” for the American man.⁴ This transformation of American masculinity not only helped the American man, but also created a fuller Christian identity for Higginson. A little under fifty years later, the future president Theodore Roosevelt extolled the virtues of sports and their influence on manliness for the young boys who must “bear [themselves] well in manly exercises and to develop [their] bod[ies]--and therefore, to a certain extent, his character--in the rough sports which call for pluck, endurance, and physical address.”⁵ The second half of the nineteenth century, bookended by the Civil War and Spanish American War--a conflict itself begun in large part, according to Kristin Hoganson, to restore a sense of martial American manhood⁶--witnessed a transformation in American masculinity as American men began to conceive of their male identity in new terms of musculature and physical fitness. As Roosevelt claimed, sports provided the perfect avenue for the sculpting of this new American man.

Michael S. Kimmel claims that in the late nineteenth century, America “had never been as preoccupied with physical health and exercise.”⁷ For many Americans, there was no better way to achieve that physical health and exercise than through the emergent national pastime, and manly sport, of baseball. As early as 1856, an anonymous letter to the editor defended baseball as the American game. The author asserted that baseball “requires strong bones, tough muscle and sound mind; and no athletic game is better calculated to strengthen the frame and develop a full, broad chest.”⁸ The American game was perfect for the young notion of muscular masculinity as “nowhere will you behold more manly forms, deep chests, and broad shoulders” than at a baseball game.⁹ Baseball and

⁴ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Saints, and Their Bodies,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1, 1858): 584, 585-586.

⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, “The American Boy,” in *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (New York: Century, 1900), 155-157.

⁶ Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1998), 200-201.

⁷ Michael Kimmel, *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2005), 65.

⁸ BASEBALL, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 1856.

⁹ *Ibid.*

the new American masculinity were thus linked to each other at their births.

The Civil War played a critical role in the spread of baseball as the “national” sport. During the war, Northern prisoners of war brought the game to the South and introduced it to their Confederate enemies. Games like the one portrayed in the print by Otto Botticher from the Salisbury Confederate Prison in North Carolina in 1862 typified the way in which soldiers used baseball as a recreation activity during the war.¹⁰



Artist: Otto Botticher or Boetticher, Lithographic firm: Sarony, Major, & Knapp, Publisher: Goupil & Co., date drawn: mid 1862, published date: 1863, catalog no.: 60.3741

By introducing their Southern brethren to the game, Northern soldiers helped to create a unified vision of a national pastime following the war. Baseball quickly assumed the mantle of the South's game as well, as pioneering baseball reporter Henry Chadwick wrote in 1871 reflecting on the condition of sport in the postbellum South, “There is probably nothing the youth of the South have so long been in need of, in the way of healthy recreation, as some outdoor sport which would afford alike a legitimate field of cultivation of those inherent attributes of manliness which characterize Southerners so much.”¹¹ After its introduction by Northern soldiers, baseball filled the void in Southerner's lives as “manly games and athletic skill have taken the place of the bloody contests on the field of battle.”¹² Thus not only did the Civil War help the game travel throughout the country, but the war also intertwined sport, masculinity, and warfare.

With America entering the postbellum age, the hundreds of

¹⁰ Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs, “Civil War Baseball,” *Smithsonian National Museum of American History*, August 2, 2012, accessed December 6, 2017, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2012/08/civil-war-baseball.html>.

¹¹ Henry Chadwick, “Baseball in the South,” *Outing an Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Recreation (1885-1906)* 12, no. 6 (September, 1888), 538.

¹² *Ibid.*

thousands of soldiers returning from the battlefield needed an activity to unleash their pent-up energy. Baseball emerged as their preferred activity. For the soldiers who were “longing for comradeship and manly exercise,” baseball, according to *The Galaxy: A Magazine for Entertaining Reading*, “supplied sport in the open air, straining exercise, rivalry, friendship, and just enough of uniform, drill, discipline, and organization to revive the pleasures without the hardships of the bygone military career.”¹³ The soldiers used baseball as a means of reintegration into American society, replacing the male-dominated military with the manly sport. Indeed, the “benefits [of the base-ball movement] are beyond measure” for the returning soldiers.¹⁴ The era of physical sport and masculinity dawned with the close of the Civil War.

Simultaneously, even while the health benefits derived from baseball and the movement of muscular Christianity popularized independently, they retained their connection to each other. In 1875, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* praised the local Plymouth Congregational Church for playing baseball even though “none of them are athletes.”¹⁵ These church members, by playing baseball, did not overlook the benefits of “good strong muscles involving sound digestions, clear heads, and powerful lungs” and their effect on a “healthy, active religion.”¹⁶ The *Tribune* viewed it as “the duty of the church people to make the physical man as possible in order that the spiritual man may accomplish the largest possible degree of work.”¹⁷ Baseball refined the physical fitness of Americans so they could go out and do good works in the world well beyond the playing field.

As American reinvented their national identity over the course of the Gilded Age, baseball continued to be the exemplar of the new valorous masculinity. Henry Chadwick defined the model baseball player as one who regards the game “as a healthful exercise, and a manly and exciting recreation.”¹⁸ Perhaps above all, baseball constituted bravery--arguably the quintessential quality of the new American manliness. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Americans professed bravery as a trait inherent to their expanding and exceptional nation. Playing baseball allowed these Americans to display their unmatched courage. The *New York Herald* wrote in 1869, “the fact that players at base ball unflinchingly face the dangers shows the inherent bravery of the American people and their

¹³ “The Base-Ball Season,” *The Galaxy: A Magazine of Entertaining Reading* (1866-1878) 1, no. 4 (October, 1868), 563.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Base-Ball and the Churches,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), Aug. 1, 1875.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Henry Chadwick, “The Model Base Ball Player,” 1867.

determination to obtain even amusement at the risk of danger.”¹⁹ The Civil War revealed a quality that many thought had largely disappeared after the Revolution: bravery. While America recovered from the war, baseball replaced military feats as the illustration of bravery.

The emergence of muscular masculinity and the rise of baseball's popularity also coincided with the new age of mass media. Baseball and its promotion of muscular American masculinity quickly became a prominent theme in this new public sphere. The still-famous “Casey at the Bat,” written by the American poet and humor columnist Ernest Thayer, first appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1888. The amusing verses quickly became one of the most famous baseball poems in America. Thayer juxtaposes the might and strength of Casey against his weak and useless teammates, Flynn and Blake. Thayer describes Flynn and Blake in effeminate terms as a “lulu” and a “cake,” respectively as opposed to “mighty Casey” who was a “sturdy batsman.”²⁰ Once Casey falls into a zero balls, two strikes hole, Thayer enhances his musculature even more: “[the crowd] saw his muscles strain./ And they knew that Casey would not let that ball go by again.” As the pitch nears Casey, “he pounds with cruel violence his bat against the plate,” but he swings and misses; “the air is shattered by the force of Casey’s blow.” The cruel violence with which Casey swings typifies the pugilistic, militaristic nature of the muscular masculinity. Men in the Gilded Age, living between two wars, came to believe that they needed to release their violent tendencies. Casey’s popularity and reputation as the best player for the Mudville Nine is wrapped up not just in his sheer talent and athleticism--and certainly not in brains--but arguably most fully in his strength and musculature. The hometown crowd yearns for him to come to bat, though they have little hope because of the weakness of his teammates. Ultimately, “Casey at the Bat” is not just a poem of silly whimsy, for it too shows the newly forged importance of musculature and might to baseball players and their adoring fans.

Popular song also exemplified baseball playing as a performance of muscular masculinity as witnessed in the 1895 song “Who Would Doubt that I’m a Man?” by A.F. Groebl. The song, written from the point of view of a baseball player, describes a worried athlete who wishes to assert his manhood through baseball. The player declares that “no one can bring better proof that he’s a man” than by catching a ball on the fly.²¹ Groebl hearkened back to the Civil War era assertion that the bravery displayed in the face of potential injury by baseball players confirms their manhood. Here, the baseball player declares “ah, ah! That hurts! That pains! But he’s

¹⁹ Editorial, “The National Game,” *New York Herald*, 1869.

²⁰ Ernest L. Thayer, “Casey at the Bat,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 3, 1888.

²¹ A.F. Groebl, “Who Would Doubt that I’m a Man?” (Cincinnati: Weidig and Company, 1895).

a coward who complains.”²² The player’s playing ability strengthens his fragile masculinity as he proclaims, “I scored a run! And well I ran! Now who would doubt that I’m a man.”²³ His playing ability, bravery, and pain tolerance directly influence his manliness. For the main character of “Who Would Doubt that I’m a Man?”, playing baseball is far from child’s play; it is his best opportunity to truly perform muscular masculinity.

Such masculinity did not just appeal to players themselves. Americans all across the country soon fell in love with the game of baseball, and occasionally they too proclaimed their love through song. “Baseball” by David Gilchrist in 1895 narrates the excitement and exhilaration of baseball fans attending the game. Fans anxiously awaited the call of “play ball!” from the umpire, and once the game started, all eyes were on the players. Even though most of the song details the fan experience, Gilchrist described the only player as “some batsman ris[ing] bold and strong”²⁴ who hits a home run to the delight of the crowd. The muscled baseball player energizes the hometown crowd through his embodiment of archetypal masculinity.

Not only did baseball players conceive of themselves as the exemplar of muscular masculinity in this era, but their potential partners did as well. In the song “The Baseball Man for Me,” written by Oralie List, a woman relates her perfect man: naturally, the baseball player. For her, the baseball player represents the pinnacle of manhood. He is a “jolly good fellow, with no streak of yellow”²⁵--once again following in the tradition of baseball players defiantly proclaiming their bravery and lack of cowardice. Of course, the baseball player is also “sturdy and strong and free.”²⁶ With this description, List contributes to the association of baseball manhood with muscled and toned bodies. Indeed, this wishful lover entertains the idea of the sweet talkers of bankers, brokers, and real estate moguls, but they wilt against the “stalwart Baseball man.”²⁷ The baseball player is the pinnacle of manhood through his musculature and strength, contrasted against the talkative office men who “may talk in language sweet.”²⁸

With the revolutionary American masculinity attached to the physical perfection of men, literary descriptions would not suffice. In order to truly fulfill the potential of muscular masculinity, Americans needed to see, envision, and envy the role models of it, and technological innovations like the photograph and chromolithograph expanded

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ David E. Gilchrist, “Baseball,” (Pittsburgh, 1895).

²⁵ Oralie List, “The Baseball Man for Me,” (New York-Chicago: Victor Kremer Co., 1909).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

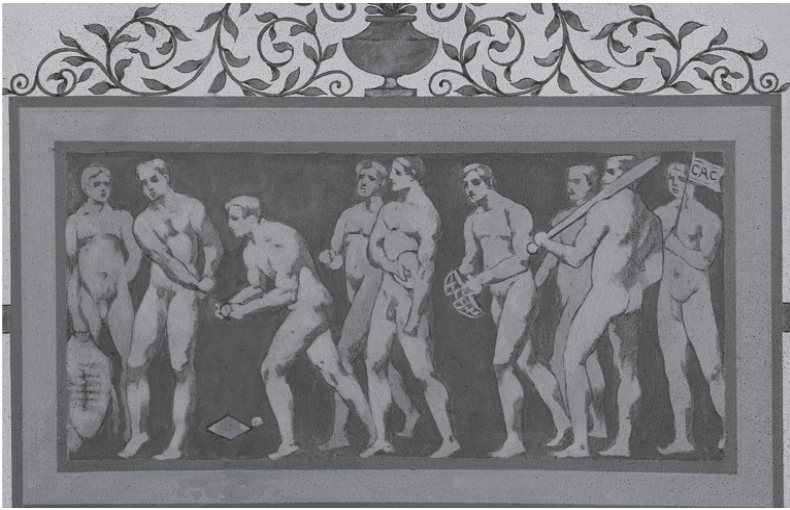
the possibilities for the distillation of images to the public in the late nineteenth century. As some of the most famous people in the country, baseball players presented the perfect vehicle to serve as these role



Base Ball, chromolithograph, (Boston: Louis Prang and Company), 1887.

models. In fact, baseball players were depicted as the paragon of the new American muscular masculinity not only in songs and poems but also in visual culture. *Base Ball*, a chromolithograph produced by Louis Prang & Company in 1887, showcases the muscular baseball player. Players for both Yale and Harvard were drawn with large, bulging muscles and skin-tight uniforms. The catcher, front and center in the scene, is particularly toned, as his back muscles pop out of his shirt and his legs are sturdy trunks. Even amateur ballplayers could serve in the role of the archetype of muscular masculinity--the revolution engaged all parts of society.

Visual representations of masculine baseball players played on classical themes as well. In 1897, Frederic C. Martin installed *Baseball*, a ceiling painting, in the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress. The painting shows a full nine member baseball team all in the nude. *Baseball* references the athletic games of ancient Greece, played in the nude, and creates a parallel between the classical embodiment of muscular masculinity--the original Olympic athlete--and the contemporary standard--the baseball player. According to German historian Wolfgang Schmale, the nude is "representational in the form of what were considered the essential traits of the male body, which could hardly have been portrayed without a process of investigation, research,

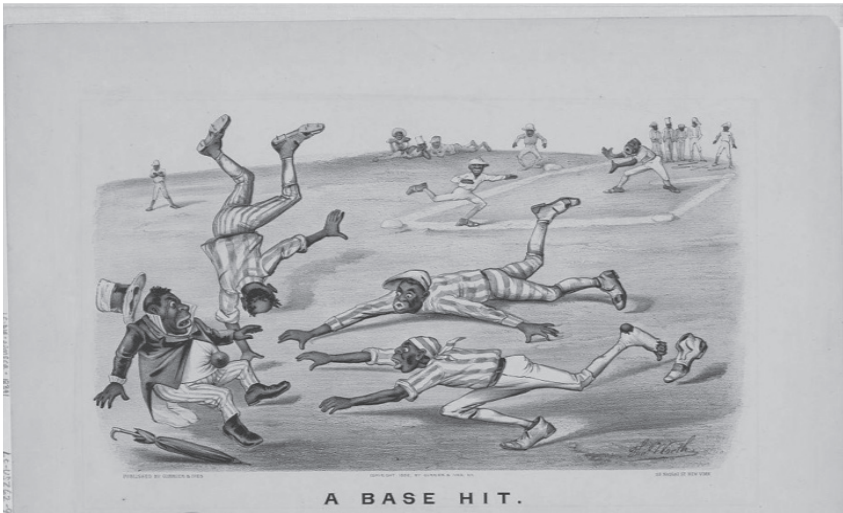


Mural depicting baseball by Frederic C. Martin. Library of Congress Thomas Jefferson Building, Washington, D.C.

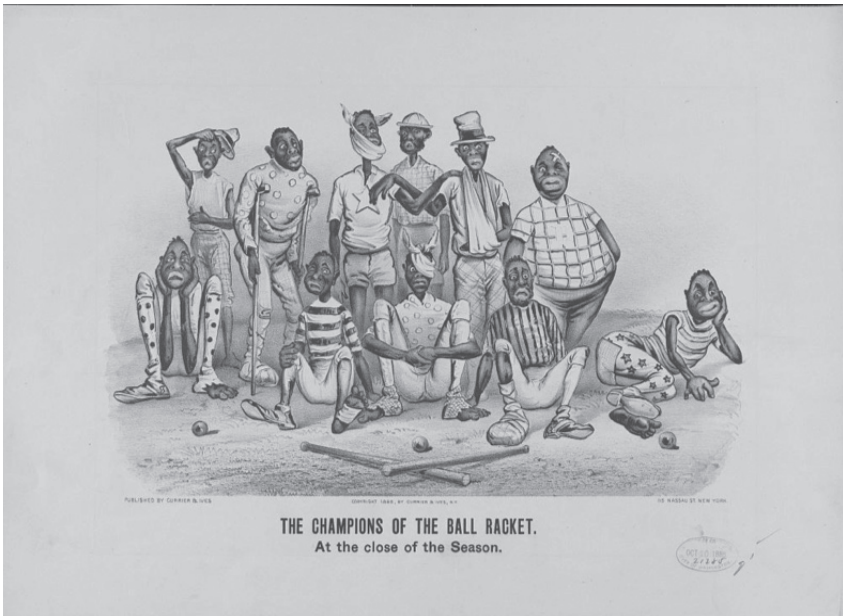
and standardization of an idealized form of masculine corporeality and identity.”²⁹ Baseball players, as the exemplification of muscular masculinity, were therefore the perfect models for a nude painting. By placing the painting in the Library of Congress, Martin situated these paragons of masculinity at the heart of American society in Washington, D.C.

To this point, the depictions of baseball players as hypermasculine have been purely flattering. Not coincidentally, all the players thus far examined have been white. Unfortunately, white artists also seized the opportunity of depicting the ideal muscled American man to emasculate black baseball players and demonstrate whites’ physical and masculine superiority. Thomas Worth produced the print *A Base Hit* in 1882 as part of his Darktown series issued by the renowned firm Currier & Ives. The print depicts a scene of black baseball players stumbling and fumbling for the ball. Contrasted with the muscled, strong, and coordinated white players, the black players seem hopelessly unathletic and lacking any muscles with stick-like legs and arms. Currier & Ives published another baseball print in Darktown called *The Champions of the Ball Racket: At the Close of the Season*. In this image, a team of black ballplayers congregates upon the season’s conclusion. Half the team sits on the ground, while the other half stand up, but they are all nursing some sort of injury. Six have bandages wrapped somewhere around their bodies, while another rests

²⁹ Wolfgang Schmale, “Nakedness and Masculine Identity: Negotiations in the Public Space,” in *Nude Men: From 1800 to the Present Day*, ed. Tobias G. Natter (Munich: Hirmer, 2012), 31.



Thomas Worth, A Base Hit, New York : Currier & Ives, c1882.



The champions of the ball racket: At the close of the season [New York] : Currier & Ives, 1885.

on a pair of crutches. This depiction of the black ballplayer as brittle and injured stands in stark contrast to the virile, strong-boned exercise that baseball provides for the white player. Clearly, Worth implied here that only the white ballplayer is ready to perform the new American muscular

masculinity through baseball. Indeed, Worth's prints reflect how the media unfairly treated black ballplayers and, by extension, the violence that accompanied them wherever they travelled. By 1887 baseball team owners had banned new contracts with black players, erecting the color line that would exist until Jackie Robinson broke it in 1947. Artists thus not only used the theme of muscular masculinity in their positive depictions of white players, but they also colluded in the general attack on the humanity--and in particular the masculinity--of black players, with incredibly real and detrimental consequences. Black players were not only excluded from Major League Baseball in this time, but also the new construction of American masculinity excluded them from even being men.

The new culture of mass consumption also lent itself to advertisements and connections between manhood and consumer goods. The tobacco industry, for example, looked to capitalize on the rising popularity of baseball as a manly game. Historian Howard Chudacoff asserts in his book *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* that "smoking also became a ritual of the new manhood."³⁰ Tobacco companies quickly began placing baseball scenes on their packaging to connect smoking with the new American manhood.

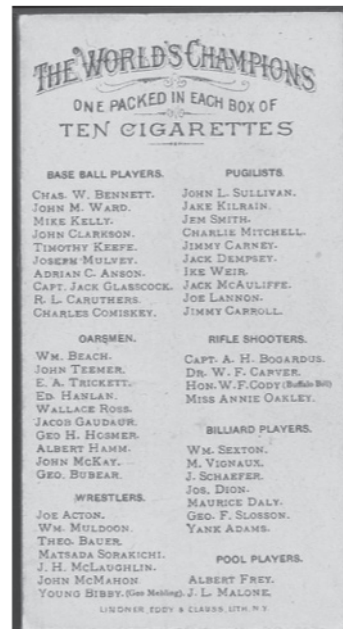
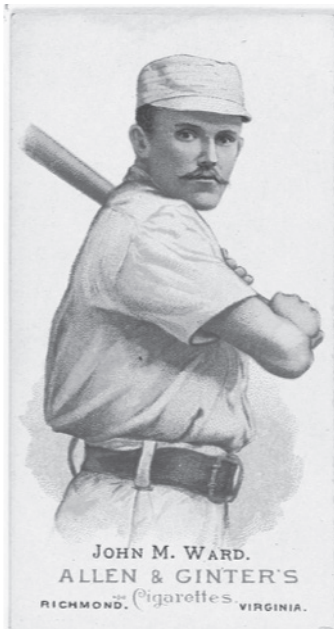


"On the fly" / The Major & Knapp Eng. Mfg. & Lith. Co., 71 Broadway, N.Y. (1867)

Packages like "On the Fly" from 1867 intimately tied baseball and tobacco, two parts of the new American manhood. The scene depicted on this particular package shows an outfielder catching a lofted ball to the outfield in the best tradition of brave manliness and baseball.

Packaging was not the only way in which tobacco and baseball

³⁰ Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 229.



John M. Ward, New York Giants, baseball card portrait. Card set: Allen & Ginter World's Champions (N28). 1887.

connected in the late nineteenth century. Baseball cards with the portraits of the most famous players in the game soon reached millions of adoring fans. One of the first sets was *Allen and Ginter's 1887 World's Champions* cards that included ten baseball players and forty other athletes, among them boxers, rowers, shooter, billiards-players, and wrestlers.³¹ The set included some of the most talented ballplayers of the day, such as John Montgomery Ward and Cap Anson (himself a major agent of segregation within the game) along with the world champion boxer, John Sullivan, and renowned shooter and frontiersman Buffalo Bill Cody. This set brought together the most manly of athletes, showcasing their brawn and strength. But perhaps the most significant attachment of manliness to these cards was their maker: Allen and Ginter cigarettes. The cigarette maker connected manly sports like boxing, shooting, and baseball with their product. Additionally, oftentimes baseball cards were not simply static portraits of fan-favorite players; rather, they were dynamic action shots of the players catching, throwing, and hitting. The dissemination of the public image of baseball players was thus tied with other manifestations of the virile, active masculinity that baseball encapsulated in the late nineteenth century.

³¹ Dean Hanley, "1887 N28 Allen & Ginter World's Champions Cards," *Dean's Cards*, accessed November 14, 2017, <https://www.deanscards.com/c/3381/1888-N28-Allen-Ginter>.



Biddeford vs. Brockton
Granite St. grounds,
Wednesday, May 27 //
Printed at the Biddeford
Journal office. Buffalo,
N.Y. : John B. Sage,
[1885]

Biddefords vs. Portland
Granite St. grounds,
Biddeford, Friday, May
22 // Printed at the
Biddeford Journal office.
Buffalo, N.Y. : John B.
Sage, [1885]

Biddeford vs. Portland
Granite St. grounds,
Saturday, May 30th //
Printed at the Biddeford
Journal office. Buffalo,
N.Y. : Published by John
B. Sage, [1885]

Even advertisements for baseball games themselves portrayed players as muscled men. In a series of lithographs advertising games at the Granite Street Grounds in Biddeford, Maine, the ballplayers have thick forearms and noticeable thighs. The picture for the May 30, 1885 game shows the batter waiting to receive the pitch, his hands clenched in anticipation and his forearm rippling, while the catcher crouches with his arms on his thighs. In turn, for the May 27 game, a batter is shown with his hands wrapped around the bat, accentuating his toned forearms. The advertisement for the May 22 game displays the pitcher, batter, and catcher all in athletic positions. The pitcher, as he looks in for the sign from the catcher, showcases his powerful posterior and shapely biceps, the batter once more clasps the bat, ready to pounce on the pitch; and the catcher awaits the pitch, hands on knees, with large forearms and calves. Teams thus exploited the bodies of baseball players as the new American muscled man in their advertisements, hoping to attract a crowd to their games.

To some, a sport such as baseball, no matter how popular, may seem historically trivial in comparison to the era's larger forces such as industrialization, immigration, and the rise of Jim Crow. Yet the

ascendance of baseball as the national game not only coincided with the beginnings of the transformation of American masculinity; the American game was foundational to such a crucial cultural transformation. After the Civil War, American manliness was no longer defined by previous Victorian notions of politeness and respect; rather, building on a tradition begun before the war, American manliness became a place for musculature and healthful exercise. With this notion in place, baseball rose to prominence through a need for an outlet for the new masculinity. Baseball typified this new American manliness as none other than Theodore Roosevelt listed the national pastime among “the true sports for a manly race.”³² By the turn of the twentieth century, baseball had risen to the top of the American sporting pantheon and brought with it, through various forms of mass media, the new, muscled version of masculinity that came so much to influence not just the nation, but the globe.

With the new muscular American man forged during the second half of the nineteenth century, America entered the Spanish American War with an army full of virile, muscular soldiers. The opening chapter of the story of American imperialism depended on, according to the contemporary novelist Maurice Thompson, “their nerve, their muscle and their moral steadfastness.”³³ The soldiers charging up San Juan Hill and digging in the trenches returned to America as heroes and pictures of muscular masculinity: “In looking at our soldiers and sailors I was filled with admiration of their lithe and muscular forms and their show of virile health and intelligence.”³⁴ Thompson noted, “It is not hard to see the effect of boxing, rowing, polo, bicycling and baseball in the make-up of our infantry and cavalry.”³⁵ Baseball, along with the sports baseball cards were paired with, trained and created a culture of physical fitness among young men that were not insignificant to the American victory. The athleticism honed by baseball, “has given us ‘the man behind the gun,’ at whom the whole world is still gazing with admiring wonder.”³⁶ Baseball’s brave, violent nature also developed the warlike, dangerous mindset needed for American soldiers to succeed. The muscular masculinity built by baseball thus not only staved off the dangers of “effeminate tendencies in young men,” but it was one of the most visible signs of American power and might throughout the world. Baseball--seemingly the most innocent and pastoral of sports, consistently beckoning to “home”--thus also came to serve as a crucial inspiration, through its cultivation of the

³² Michael Kimmel, *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2005), 67.

³³ Maurice Thompson, “Vigorous Men, a Vigorous Nation,” *The Independent ...Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* (1848-1921) 50, no. 2596 (Sep 01, 1898), 609.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 609.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 609.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 609.

new masculinity, both physical and emotional, for the new American empire.

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